man has been possessed by the Wielda. But the Wielda is an intelligence in itself, First Officer, one which perhaps cannot die but requires a host. It was denied that host for millenia. I believe it is taking revenge. And yes, I do believe it is the single agent which has induced a state of terror in my people. I do not think you would like the Wielda, Mr. Spock. You would not care to be ruled by it."

"And the Romulans want it for a weapon?"

"Yes. They tried to deal with it directly, and lost half their men. The Crown manipulates energy. It can monitor and interfere with any energy transmission. That is why I forbade the use of the transmitter. The Wielda must not have access to a starship. Before I would loose it on the galaxy, I would see this planet and all my people destroyed. I regret the necessity, gentlebeings. I have left tapes explaining this in locations on several planets. They were directed to your leaders in Starfleet and their release was automatically scheduled for any time in which I did not personally send an "intercept" message every two days. I have now been a prisoner of the Romulans for three days. If we cannot destroy the Wielda, we will die with the rest of this world."

It was the last shock in a series of them. Clement stood up, his face dark with anger. "You--filthy--native. We came to help you, and you--" his voice was shaking with anger at the injustice, the danger, his hands balled into fists. At a glance from T'serek, Hillis took him affably by the scruff of the neck and stepped on his instep. Clement shut his mouth suddenly, and sat down again, but he did not apologize for his outbreak. Through Spock's body Nadia could feel the tremor as Sunderson tried not to follow Clement's example. Her soft voice sounded very small in the dark.

"The Captain wouldn't do that, would he, Mr. Spock?" appealing to the Vulcan as an expert.

It was a long moment before Spock answered, and Nadia wondered if he were debating the wisdom of telling them the truth.

"The Captain is unlikely to act precipitously in such a matter...but should circumstances require such an action, he is, in fact, capable of it." In the silence that followed his statement, Spock shifted, making himself a little more comfortable before he spoke again. "We have approximately two days to prevent such a necessity. I suggest we take advantage of the opportunity to rest while we can." In an entirely matter of fact way he closed his eyes and prepared to sleep.

Nadia choked back a hysterical giggle. Yes, Mr. Spock. Welcome back, sir. There's nothing like one hell of a scientific puzzle and a threat to put James Kirk on the spot to facilitate first aid. She pressed her forehead against his shoulder--gently--and went to sleep.

She woke to the sound of male voices and found she was now curled against Sunderson's back. Spock had extricated himself and resumed his own uniform. The raft was nudging the steep canyon wall, and Hills and Tom Craven were fending it off with two poles. Diffused light from above showed that they were now in an open canyon, but an overhang hid them from the sky. Goren was pointing at a jumble of rock that had split off from the wall, and T'serek was belly down at the edge of the raft with his arm thrust into the water. Neither the Speaker nor Spock looked in top form, but they were improved over the night before. Nadia wondered how much of their thirty hours had passed.

"It widens out below," T'serek said. "It doesn't feel blocked. The current is quite strong." In the daylight the water was an impenetrable molasses brown. "I'll go down and see if we can get through." Sunderson heard their voices and sat up. She wasn't a pretty girl, but she had good skin and Nadia envied her the ability to wake looking younger than she was.

"What's happening?" she asked. Clement had been sitting pointedly separate from the cluster at the raft's edge and he took the first opportunity to move to Sunderson's side. A night's sleep hadn't done anything to give him a competitive edge against T'serek. The security men were all marked with dust, but actively pursuing a solution to their situation. Clement looked touseled, seedy and slack in comparison. Granted that it was not his work, but he could have done something about his appearance. Nadia had already downgraded him in her mind, however brilliant he might be in a lab. Now she moved away in disgust, dipping her hands in the water and scrubbing them over her face, combing her hair with her fingers.

"They're trying to get into another cave," Clement said, but Sunderson's eyes were on T'serek stripping his shirt off, tying a coil of rope about his waist. Muscles rippled down his back as he lifted a fair-sized boulder in both hands.

"I'll get as deep as I can, and if there's air, I'll pull three times and send the rope back. I might not be able to swim back against the current."

"And if you do not pull?" asked the Speaker.

T'serek's still face warmed a little with his smile. "Then you'd better." Spock accepted the pole Hillis was using, and the two heavy worlders walked to the upstream end of the raft. Hillis knoted the end of the rope around his waist, and T'serek stepped off the end without further ado, while Hillis guided the rope between the raft and canyon wall.

"Tom, swing this end out, in case I have to pull him back." Craven shifted position and put more muscle into the pole he held braced against the rock wall. The gap widened, but all they could see was the rope angling down into the brown water. Then the rope vibrated, once, twice, three times. Hillis drew it back, and T'serek came with it, popping out of the water like a porpoise and pulling himself up on to the raft. He shook the water out of his eyes and pushed his hair back.

"It's not far at all. There was a shelf on the left, about two feet under the water."

"This is the place," the Speaker said. "By entering here we avoid much of the maze. And the Wielda is within. I can feel it draw me."

"The sooner we're inside the sooner we can forget about the Romulans," Craven said. "I don't mean to belittle your artifact, sir, but I get the feeling we're being watched, or followed. The sooner we get under cover the better I'll like it."

The Speaker made a s-s-sst of consternation between his teeth. "It begins. That <u>is</u> the Wielda. No matter. We must enter."